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SUBJECT: KIRCHNER TAKES ON TWO INFLUENTIAL DAILIES

Summary

1. President Kirchner recently took his contentious relationship with the Argentine press to a new level, publicly and directly attacking Argentina's two most influential daily newspapers -- Clarin and La Nacion. Although La Nacion is accustomed to being targeted by Kirchner, Clarin has enjoyed a more privileged relationship with the Kirchner administration. Clarin did not back down, firing back with a written rebuttal. The President's go at Clarin sets a new precedent that reaches beyond Argentina's aggrieved journalists into one of the country's most powerful conglomerates. End Summary.

Tight Control Over the Media

2. Argentine journalists often complain that President Nestor Kirchner's press events are, in fact, nothing more than an opportunity to make statements because he refuses to take questions. Technically, he has never given a press conference since being elected. First Lady Cristina Kirchner never gave one during her 2005 senatorial campaign. Kirchner's spokesman, Miguel Nunez, rarely speaks to the press. Cabinet Chief Alberto Fernandez controls the government's media budget, which is distributed disproportionately in favor of Pagina 12, a pro-Kirchner leftwing daily with a tiny circulation of 12,000. These aspects of Kirchner's tight reins over the distribution of official information and funding have been increasingly criticized of late, both from inside and outside Argentina. The Inter-American Press Association, an NGO that focuses on the protection of press freedom, the ADC (Asociacion por los Derechos Civiles, an NGO supported by the Open Society Institute) and ADEPA (Argentina's Asociacion de Entidades Periodisticas Argentinas) have all published critical assessments of press treatment in Argentina. The New York Times and the Economist have also run articles on the difficulties faced by the Argentine media.

Clarín's Tax Reform Article Spurs a Battle of Words

3. In this atmosphere, a front-page article by Clarin, citing government sources, reported that the GOA was studying tax reform, prompted strong criticism from Kirchner on February 21. In an unexpected, extended harangue against Clarin's article, the visibly annoyed President accused the paper of calling him a liar and claimed "no paper or

journalist, or most of them, ever issues an errata or correction..."

¶4. Clarin's Chief Editor, Ricardo Kirschbaum, responded with a stinging editorial: "Journalism -- through its autonomy and freedom -- is a fundamental piece of the democratic system." Kirschbaum pointed out that the article never called the president a liar. He confirmed the article's information regarding tax reform and the credibility of official sources. He noted that Clarin -- and he personally -- regularly issue corrections. Journalists, he insisted, have the right to publish information as it is, confirmed by sources, "otherwise, journalism is limited to official information." Clarin's chief editor interpreted Kirchner's speech as a reminder to members of his administration that information is to be centralized "with an iron fist."

¶5. Daily Clarin is part of the powerful Clarin Group conglomerate that includes Channels 13 (second in rating) and TN (cable), Radio Mitre (second in rating), a part of the DYN wire service (in partnership with La Nacion), its own paper factory, and the provincial papers La Voz del Interior (Cordoba) and Los Andes (Mendoza). The Clarin Group's owners, Ernestina Herrera de Noble and Hector Magnetto, are viewed as particularly powerful oligarchs in Argentine politics. Media analysts point to Clarin's decision to criticize former President Carlos Menem as the beginning of his fall from public grace.

¶6. The Clarin Group's relationship with Kirchner was reportedly set when the government saved the conglomerate from a creditors' takeover after it almost collapsed in the wake of the 2001 financial crisis. The government signed the "law of cultural assets," which prohibited foreign creditors from taking over Clarin. In May 2005, the government extended current television licenses, giving 15 years to Clarin (more than others) and buying additional good will from the company for the government. In this context, Clarin has had more access than its chief competitor La Nacion to Kirchner and his government, and has been less critical. Nevertheless, Clarin's emergence from financial difficulties has placed it in a position where it will hesitate less to publicly rebuke the government over issues that it cares about. Several weeks ago, the paper strongly criticized the now-adopted reform of the Council of Magistrates (REFTEL: Buenos Aires 452). The recent riposte, however, crossed a new line in the Kirchner-Clarin relationship and required approval from the owners themselves before publication.

Kirchner Whips La Nacion

¶7. Kirchner decided the following day to dress down by name La Nacion's Joaquin Morales Sola, Argentina's most prestigious columnist, for his criticism of the reform of the Council of Magistrates. In Kirchner's dark horse run for the Casa Rosada in 2003, La Nacion took an officially neutral position, but was sympathetic to center-right candidate Ricardo Lopez Murphy and since then has taken a critical line against many of the government's policies. Kirchner has occasionally attacked La Nacion since coming to power, when he accused the paper of failing to report atrocities committed during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. Journalists for La Nacion work with little access to the presidency. Kirchner later granted a telephone interview to Morales Sola and La Nacion simply reprinted the president's original critical comments.

Comment

¶8. Kirchner's contentiousness with the press is part of his operating style of slamming opponents and then making up on his terms. As long as his popularity ratings remain high, Kirchner and his advisors will likely continue to believe that he benefits - or at least loses nothing - by frequently

attacking the media and frustrating journalists with his tight control over information. What changed in this recent case was that Clarin - the major media conglomerate considered to be the barometer of Argentine public sentiment - decided to fight back for the first time.

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